



Fostering Disability Identity in Higher Education

Disability Summit

Colleen Floyd and Emily Abrams

Meet the Presenters



Emily Abrams
she/her

Academic Success
Coordinator - TRIO



Colleen Floyd
she/her

Access Specialist - RCPD

Table of Contents

1

Disability
Identity

2

The
Framework

3

Negotiating
Disability

4

Fostering
Identity



Scan Me!

Access Statement

- We welcome all bodyminds in this space. Please move about (stim, knit, lean against the wall, stand, lie down, come and go) as you need. Everyone occupies and exists in space differently, however you best engage is affirmed here.
- Please let us know if you need something to be repeated, or need a break.
- Please save questions for the end.

1

Disability Identity



Multiple Social Identities

In addition to personal traits we each hold and consider markers of our individuality (e.g. occupation, personality traits, etc. (Jones, 1997), we also each hold multiple intersecting social identities

- Social identities are externally defined by contextual differences such as race, gender, disability status, social class, etc. (Jones & McEwan, 2000)
- Social identities intersect and exist within systems that privilege some identities while simultaneously oppressing others (e.g. racism, ableism, classism, heterosexism, etc.) (Jones & McEwan, 2000)

Disability as a Social Identity

“People with disabilities have forged a group identity. We share a common history of oppression and a common bond of resilience. We generate art, music, literature, and other expressions of our lives and our culture, infused from our experience of disability. Most importantly, we are proud of ourselves as people with disabilities. We claim our disabilities with pride as part of our identity. We are who we are: we are people with disabilities.” (Brown, 2015)

Disability as a Social Identity

- Is multifaceted, encompassing culture, self-expression, lived experience, activism, and pride (Brown, 2015)
- Is a nuanced, political category
 - Not all those with lived experience of disability adopt the identity label due to a number of factors such as race, ethnicity, culture, upbringing, stigma, and safety
 - Not adopting the identity label does not invalidate a person's lived experience, nor does it make someone any less valuable or worthy of access

2

The Framework

Reviewing the history of disability in higher education and common disability narratives



The History

- "Disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education" (Dolmage, 2017, p.3)
- "...people with disabilities have been traditionally seen as objects of study in higher education, rather than as teachers or students" (Dolmage, 2017, p.45)
- Prior Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, only 11% of campuses had Disability Resource Offices (DROs) or "professionals". Shortly after, the remaining 89% developed these positions and offices (Maudaus, 1996)

Post-Disability Narratives

Critical Race Theory challenges post-racial ideology. Feminist theory challenges post-sexist rhetoric. Today, we will be exploring the concept of post-disability.

Examples:

- COVID-19: “Return to Normal”
- The rise of health and wellness framework: Separating mental health from disability
- Universal design: Decentering/depoliticize disability

Post-Disability: “Return to Normal”

Normal for whom?

- “It’s a phrase repeated everywhere as people long for the old way of doing things. For me, the old way of doing things was a nightmare” (Rajkumar, 2022, para. 3)
- “For me, “back to normal” means trying once again to avoid being knocked over by classmates bolting down a hallway, or navigating the push buttons that are supposed to open doors but are often unreliable. It means struggling to keep up with my nondisabled peers on a campus and in a city not built for people like me.” (Rajkumar, 2022, para. 4)

Post-Disability: Separating Mental Health from Disability

Mental Health

Psychological Disability

“...although disability and mental illness represent distinct categories of existence and experience, individuals identified as disabled and those identified as “mentally ill” are routinely treated in ways which make them appear “the same but different” (Beresford & Wallcraft, 1997, p. 66, as cited in Aubrecht, K., 2012, p. 73).

Post-Disability: Separating Mental Health from Disability

Mental Health

Psychological Disability

The Implications: A Dangerous Divide

- Separating Campus Resources
- Denying Opportunity For Cross-Movement Community
- Often mental health is framed as an individual experience, separated from global/structural context

Post-Disability: Universal Design

"Similar to imperatives for diversity and inclusion that remain neutral on issues of power and privilege (and accordingly, reinforce hierarchies) (Ahmed 2012, 57), Universal Design has become emblematic of a depoliticized orientation toward disability, which invokes human variation as a value but refuses to understand difference as tied to systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, or ableism" (Hamraie, 2016, p. 18).

"...architect Josh Safdie captures the discursive slippage between disability-neutral and anti-disability positions: ..."we have the capacity to effectively eliminate a person's disability"" (Safdie and Szenasy 2011, as cited in Hamraie, 2016, p. 16).



Negotiating Identity

3

Accommodations

- Disability is constructed through a compliance lens
 - Legal definition of disability
 - Diagnosis and documentation requirements
- Disabled people are positioned as a legal liability
- Disabled people with accommodations have increased logistical responsibilities

All of this has an impact on how you perceive your disability in relationship to higher education.

Accommodations

- “For many students, the first time they or their families engage with assessment or identification processes might be through their school, creating a unique tension between how schools think about disability and how students understand themselves as disabled” (Parekh, 2022, p.4).
- “...constructing every student as a possible threat to the reputation of the school...the student is seen as someone who must be prevented from suing the school..” (Dolmage, 2017, p.48)

Intersectional Tension

- Oftentimes, students are expected to compartmentalize their intersecting identities in campus spaces, forcing them to choose one over the other in order to feel welcome in a given environment (Abrams & Abes, 2021)
- Identities can never be fully separated from one another (Community, Equity, Data & Information Lab, 2023)
 - Expecting a student to do so is harmful and a perpetuation of intersectional systemic oppression

4

Fostering Identity



Why Does this Matter?

- Disabled students matter!
- Students who are given room to explore and develop a disability identity tend to have better outcomes (Forber-Pratt et al., 2020; The Council on Quality and Leadership, 2020; Talapatra & Snider, 2023)
 - Increased academic outcomes, as well as increased self-esteem, self-acceptance, sense of self, sense of belonging, sense of pride, and reduced internalized ableism (Talapatra & Snider, 2023)

What is Happening on Campuses?

Disability Cultural Centers:

- **1991:** Disabled students at the University of Minnesota, inspired by the passing of the ADA, founded the Disabled Students Cultural Center (DSCC) and secured a physical space on campus to share disability culture and pride with each other and with the rest of the campus community (Elmore et al., nd)
- 11 more have shown up across the country since - not enough!

What is Happening on Campuses?

- Disabled students are finding homes in online communities (Miller, 2017), such as on social media and forums like Discord
 - Provides an opportunity to engage socially in ways that are more accessible and safe, as well as opportunities for providing and receiving mutual aid among their peers
- Student and employee organizations
- Disability-specific programming and trainings taking place

MSU's Disability Pride Month

MSU celebrates Disability Pride Month in October! This is only the second year, so we are hoping more folks will begin planning disability related programming in October! This year you can look forward to:

- **Oct 5:** Adaptive Sports Day (tentative)
- **Oct 7:** Disability Justice with Lydia X. Z. Brown (virtual speaker event)
- **Oct. 10:** Disability Trivia Bingo with CSD
- **Oct 22:** Disability Zine Workshop



Check out MSU's
Disability Pride
Guide

What Can We Do?

- Integrate disability perspectives and Disability Studies into curriculum
- Plan disability-related programming
- Host disabled speaker events
- Include disability in DEIB efforts
- Incorporate disability in mental health conversations/programming
- Self-disclose, if you're comfortable
 - There is privilege in being able to do this - it may not be something you are able to do safely, and that is okay!



THANKS!

Do you have any questions?

Colleen Floyd: floydcol@msu.edu

Emily Abrams: abramsem@msu.edu

CREDITS: This presentation template was created by **Slidesgo**, including icons by **Flaticon** and infographics & images by **Freepik**

References

- Abrams, E. J. & Abes, E. S. (2021). "It's finding peace in my body": Using crip theory to understand authenticity for a queer, disabled college student. *Journal of College Student Development*, 62(3), 261-275. doi:10.1353/csd.2021.0021
- Aubrecht, K. (2012). The New Vocabulary of Resilience and the Governance of University Student Life. *Studies in Social Justice*, 6, 67-83.
- Campanile, J. (2020, September 11). Thanks to the pandemic, the needs of people with disabilities are finally being met, but will it last?: Commentary. *The Baltimore Sun*.
<https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/op-ed/bs-ed-op-0913-disabilities-pandemic-20200911-i6t3pybeynal3hpsh5akqos5ca-story.html>
- Community, Equity, Data & Information Lab. "DL Toolkit: Module 1.2-What Is Disability Identity? - Community, Equity, Data & Information Lab." *Community, Equity, Data & Information Lab*, 14 Apr. 2023, www.cedi.umd.edu/dl-toolkit-disabilityidentity/. Accessed 6 Sept. 2024.

References

- Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. University of Michigan Press.
- Forber-Pratt, A. J., Merrin, G. J., Mueller, C. O., Price, L. R., & Kettrey, H. H. (2020). Initial factor exploration of disability identity. *Rehabilitation psychology, 65*(1), 1.
- Friedman, C. (2020). *Disability and Identity: We Need To Do Better*. The Council on Quality and Leadership.
<https://www.c-q-l.org/resources/newsletters/disability-and-identity-we-need-to-do-better/>
- Hamraie, A. (2016). Universal Design and the Problem of “Post-Disability” Ideology. *Design and Culture, 8*(3), 285–309.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2016.1218714>

References

- Madaus, J. W. (1996). Administration of Postsecondary Offices for Students with Disabilities: Perceptions of Essential job Functions. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Connecticut, Storrs.
- Miller, R. A. (2017). "My Voice Is Definitely Strongest in Online Communities": Students Using Social Media for Queer and Disability Identity-Making. *Journal of College Student Development* 58(4), 509-525.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0040>.
- Parekh, G. (2022). Ableism in education: Rethinking school practices and policies. W. Norton & Co (Chapter 1)

References

- Rajkumar, S. (2022, May 6). The rush to “back to normal” at college and work is ignoring disabled students. Boston Globe.
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/05/06/magazine/rush-back-normal-college-work-is-ignoring-disabled-people/>
- Talapatra, D., & Snider, L. A. (2023). The importance of identity culture: Academic foundations for identity-affirming scholarship and practice with individuals with intellectual disability.